



Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area

National Landscape Conservation System

FY 2009 Annual Manager's Report

NATIONAL LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION SYSTEM

Site Name: Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area

Manager: Tom Schnell

Address: Safford Field Office, 711 14th Ave, Safford, Az. 85546

Website: www.blm.gov/az/st/en/fo/safford_field_office.html

Safford Field Office, Gila District, Arizona State Office

The Arizona Desert Wilderness Act of 1990 (Public Law 101-628).

Acreage: approximately 21,767 acres of public land and 1,720 acres of private land within its designated boundaries.

Estimated Annual Visitation: 38,000

1. Natural and Heritage Resources Conditions

- Heritage Resources

- Overall condition of cultural resources within the Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area (Gila Box) is good; however several historic sites are in poor and failing condition. These sites are "homesteads" found along the Gila River established in the late 1800s to early 1900's. Most of these sites are lean-to or dug-out cabins with remnant corrals and out buildings. One stone cabin on the Gila is in poor to failing condition. Flood damage producing cut banks are of notable concern.
- This fiscal year 14 cultural sites were monitored with 9 sites receiving light maintenance. Gila Box staff gave two heritage resource presentations. One was to high school students and teachers from the Gila River Indian Community and included a tour of a long-term Hohokam occupation site. A second presentation was to 20 college students from Iraq and included a talk on the restoration of historic structures.



Serna Cabin

- Prehistoric sites within the Gila Box are in fair to good condition. Vandalism and looting in years past have left some prehistoric sites in less than desirable condition.
- Historic site accomplishments for this year include installation of an interpretive panel at Serna Cabin describing its history and preservation efforts.

- Natural Resources

- Overall condition of natural resources within the Gila Box is good. Two resource protection issues are directly related to the annual monsoon. Monsoonal flooding produces wash-outs of roads and gap fencing leading to excessive erosion and inadvertent livestock trespass. These two issues are being addressed yearly through scheduled and unscheduled monitoring and maintenance.
- The Gila Box gap fence condition inventory for all livestock river access related gap fencing in the conservation area continues. Several portions of these fences were repaired or replaced.
- Controlling excessive erosion due to monsoonal activity is an ongoing action. The Gila District force account crew reconstructed several miles of flood damaged access roads and recreation facilities.
- Monitoring of the memorandum of understanding (MOU) and 10 year pipeline operation plan between the City of Safford and Safford Field Office continued. The MOU and 10 year plan provides guidance and specific actions for maintenance and operation of the municipal water system. The system is located within the Gila Box in the Bonita Creek watershed.
- Invasive species: A total of 20 acres of Salt Cedar were treated.



City Pipeline Along Bonita Creek

- A total of 21,767 acres (100% of the Gila Box) were assessed in FY08 using land health standards. One-hundred percent of the assessed acres met land health standards. A 100% assessment occurs every 10 years.
- Illegal use of off-highway vehicles (OHV) within the Gila Box is one of the most controversial issues and resource damaging uses in the conservation area. Impacts include damage to riparian vegetation, stream bed and banks, and disruption to fish and wildlife. Current OHV management limits vehicle use to designated roads. Prior to designation of the Gila Box in 1990 OHV use was virtually uncontrolled and commonly occurred within both the Gila River and Bonita Creek. This historical use pattern has proven difficult to alter. Development of a Transportation Plan for the Safford Field Office will result in the signing of all designated routes with a result in the reduction of impacts caused by illegal OHV use. The Gila Box is part of the Gila Unit Travel Management Plan (TMP). In FY09, the 3 alternative maps developed during the Evaluation Tree Process for the Gila Unit TMP were distributed for public comment. A preferred travel map will be developed incorporating these comments and will be a part of the Draft TMP which will go out for public comment in 2010.

- Gila Box and Safford Field Office staff provided both inventory and monitoring this year for native fish including the threatened and endangered species Gila chub and razorback sucker. Wildlife monitoring was also provided on Bonita Creek and the Gila River primarily focusing on the willow flycatcher, yellow billed cuckoo, leopard frog, Mexican garter snake, and raptors. Gila Box staff conducted 10 floatboat patrols on the Gila River fish, wildlife, riparian, and range monitoring purposes. Range staff completed monitoring for four allotments within the conservation area.
- Bonita Creek Restoration Project Update: In October of FY09 four native fish species were reintroduced into Bonita Creek following stream restoration. Specific monitoring of the repatriated native fish species in Bonita Creek occurred in FY09. Native fish species collected were identified, measured, weighed and released at the collection site.



Seining for Fish Monitoring

- Water quality testing for E. coli at full body contacts sites on the Gila River and Bonita Creek occurs each year from May through September. These sites are popular swimming holes for Gila Box visitors. This year all samples fell within E. coli standards. Also, macroinvertebrate sampling was conducted at 3 sites on Bonita Creek and 5 sites on the Gila River. Macroinvertebrates found at all 8 sites indicate relatively good health for both watersheds.

2. Recreation Facilities, Roads, and Trails Conditions

- The overall condition of recreation facilities is good. Monsoonal flooding caused light to moderate damage in FY09. Primary damage includes washed out OHV barriers, boat ramps, roads, and parking areas close to the Gila River and Bonita Creek. Gila Box recreation facilities are maintained through a maintenance contract (October – July) and by the Gila Box staff. This fiscal year Gila Box staff and a recreation maintenance contractor maintained 26 recreation sites within the Box including approximately 6 miles of trail maintenance. New construction for FY09 included installation of an information kiosk at the Serna Cabin Picnic area.

- Interpretive signs were installed on the Cottonwood and Gila Box River trails.
- Overall the road system is in fair to good condition. Road maintenance is provided through contract and the Gila District force account crew. Fifteen miles of road were maintained in FY09. There is still a back log of roads within the Gila Box needing maintenance.
- Gila Box staff continues to plan with the Arizona Department of Transportation to construct a new intersection at the junction of the Black Hills Back Country Byway, major Gila Box access road, and Arizona State Highway 191. The existing intersection has a very limited line of sight with no turn-out lanes.
- Gila Box staff conducted 10 floatboat patrols to monitor recreation use impacts and provide visitor contact, information and assistance on the Gila River.
- Gila Box portal, directional, informational, and regulatory signs are installed and are up to standard. Sign management is currently provided through a sign plan developed in FY03.



Cottonwood Trail Trailhead

- Asset Priority Index/Facility Condition Index: 79% of assets are in Quadrant 1 (adequate condition, high priority); 4% are in Quadrant 2 (poor condition, high priority); 3% are in Quadrant 3 (poor condition, low priority), 9% in Quadrant 4 (adequate condition, low priority).
- 100% of assets were included in the Gila Box RNCA Comprehensive Asset Business Plan.

3. Outreach, Environmental Education, Interpretation, and Volunteers

- The primary thrust of the Gila Box interpretive program is to educate the public about the resources and values in the Box, teach resource conservation, and promote pride, ownership and value in the conservation area. This objective is met through on-site interpretive stations, an agreement with the Graham County of Commerce, national and local volunteer events and presentations to local schools, organizations, clubs, and civic groups concerning the Gila Box resources, values, and uses.

- Sixteen presentations were given to schools and community organizations reaching approximately 140 people. Fiscal year 09 visitor estimations for on-site interpretive stations total about 7,500 visitors. Total visitation for the Gila Box in FY09 was 27,428 visits equaling 27,796 visitor days.
- During FY09 the Gila Box river ranger continued to work on production of a Gila River Floatboat Guide. The draft boating guide is scheduled for completion during FY10.
- Currently, no friends group exists for the Gila Box. However, local Boy Scout troops provide a dependable source for volunteer projects.
- Two site hosts at Riverview Campground provided 1,920 volunteer hours. Six volunteers worked for a total of 236 hours assisting with Gila River floatboat patrol duties including trash pick-up, patrol logistics, monitoring, and recreation inventory. These volunteer efforts totaled 2,156 hours and \$43,659.00 in labor dollars.
- The Gila Box RNCA does not have a visitor center.



Site Hosts at Riverview Campground

4. Science

- No Science Program initiative at this time.

5. Partnerships

- Continue to manage and monitor the memorandum of understanding (MOU) and 10 year pipeline operation and maintenance plan with the City of Safford. Implementation of the MOU initiates mutually approved actions within the Bonita Creek watershed to operate and maintain the municipal water system. The actions focus on continuing to provide high quality drinking water while allowing protection and enhancement of Gila Box natural and cultural resources.
- The Gila Box continued a cooperative effort with the Arizona Department of Transportation to construct a new intersection at the junction of the Black Hills Back

Country Byway, a major Gila Box access road, and Arizona State Highway 191. The existing intersection has a very limited line of sight with no turn-out lanes.

- An agreement with the Graham County Chamber of Commerce to maintain and operate a Tourist Information Center continued in FY09. The purpose of the Center is to provide outdoor recreation information to visitors to Graham County and to educate visitors about the land, its resources and opportunities, proper land use ethics, and the agencies that manage the land.
- As of the beginning of the new fiscal year, there was no DOI action toward approval of the nominations for the Gila Box Advisory Committee (GBAC) that were submitted by the Safford Field Office through the Arizona State Office in February 2008. Five nominations had been sent forward: two for renewal, two to fill vacancies, and one as an alternate. In the interim, while waiting for these selections by DOI, the Committee Charter expired. The Safford Field Office was notified by the BLM Washington Office that, due to the Charter expiring, a new one would have to be submitted for approval, incorporating nationwide changes to Charter formatting. After approval of the Charter, a "Call for Nominations" for all seven GBAC members would need to be done. This basically would require us to start from the beginning, expending additional funds on a Federal Register publication.

6. Planning and Business Practices

- We are currently using the Gila Box Management Plan, Environmental Assessment and Decision Record, January, 1998. This plan will be revised when we begin the Safford RMP. There is no definite date when we will begin the RMP process.
- The only American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 Project (ARRA) occurring in the Gila Box is the Gila Box Riparian NCA Vegetation Treatments. This project has not yet started.
- Total expenditures for labor for the Gila Box in FY09 came to \$446,357. Labor work months for the Box totaled 67.5. Volunteer contribution of 2,156 hours equaled \$43,659. The Gila Box received \$2,114.97 from recreation fees for developed site camping, reservation type day use and floatboat trips. No contributed funds were spent for the Gila Box in FY09.



Volunteer on a monitoring trip – Gila River

